

Enduring Friendship

Former U.S. Ambassador

John Kenneth Galbraith

By MICHAEL JAY FRIEDMAN

John Kenneth Galbraith, the public intellectual whose career transcended his formal training as an economist to encompass the worlds of politics, diplomacy and social analysis, died April 29 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the age of 97.

From April 1961 to July 1963 Galbraith served as President John F. Kennedy's ambassador to India, a post he had desired since advising India's Planning Commission in 1956. As ambassador, Galbraith established a strong personal relationship with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, offered economic advice and argued for increased U.S. aid. He also shaped Washington's pro-India tilt during the 1962 border conflict with China. Galbraith was an avid collector of Indian art and in 1968 co-authored with Mohinder Singh Randhawa *Indian Painting: The Scenes,*

Themes and Legends.

In 1991, India honored Galbraith with its second-highest civilian award, the Padma Vibhushan, for his contributions to strengthening ties between India and United States. In accepting the award, Galbraith said, "Nothing gives me greater pride than looking back on my two excursions to what we shall one day call not only the world's largest democracy, but also the world's most successful democracy, both politically and economically."

Drawing on insights of the British economist John Maynard Keynes and the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen, Galbraith enunciated a broad vision of the relationships between government, labor and business in the modern economy. His challenge to the assumed link between increasing material production and social health anticipated the work of the Nobel

laureate Amartya Sen and the "post-materialist" school of economic thought.

Galbraith was born October 15, 1908, in Ontario, Canada. After earning a doctorate in agricultural economics from the University of California at Berkeley, Galbraith in 1934 joined the economics department at Harvard University, an affiliation he would maintain for much of his professional life. He became a U.S. citizen in 1937.

He accepted an editor's position at *Fortune* magazine in 1943, writing articles that explained what came to be known as Keynesian economics. Keynes had argued that high unemployment reflected insufficient "demand," defined by Keynes as the sum of consumer expenditures, private investment and government spending. During hard times, when consumers and businesses could not



spend or invest sufficiently, Keynes argued that increased government spending was necessary to increase demand and reduce unemployment. At *Fortune*, Galbraith honed an ability to explain these concepts to a general readership, a talent that would anchor much of his subsequent career.

In 1952, Galbraith published *American Capitalism: The Concept of Countervailing Power*. He argued that even though large American corporations held unprecedented market power they also drove the technological progress necessary for future prosperity. Even so, checks on their influence—"countervailing power" Galbraith called it—were needed. Government regulation and labor unions were two such forces. The book sold 400,000 copies, and established Galbraith as a public intellectual of the first rank.

In 1958, Galbraith produced possibly his most influential work. *The Affluent Society* argued that the United States essentially had solved the problem of economic insecurity. With basic needs satisfied, Americans increasingly amassed private wealth in the form of heavily advertised but ultimately unnecessary consumer goods. Meanwhile, the nation remained poor in such "public goods" as health services, housing and transportation. Galbraith called on a "New Class" of educated, intellectual elites—much like Galbraith himself, critics suggested—to work toward redressing the balance between private wealth and "public squalor."

Even as *The Affluent Society* became a

"He laid the foundation of an enduring friendship between our two countries on which we are now attempting to build a new edifice defined by trust and mutual benefit. Generations of Indians have admired his wisdom and humor and thanked him for his friendship. In his passing away India has lost a dear and trusted friend, the discipline of economics has lost a most lucid interpreter, the people of America have lost a great liberal and a voice of reason and his admirers around the world have lost a profound teacher, thinker, philosopher, diplomat and a man of peace."

—Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

million-seller, Galbraith's prescriptions of slower economic growth proved controversial. Leon Keyserling, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers under President Harry S. Truman, wrote tartly: "It is really hard to imagine where Mr. Galbraith was when he wrote all this. I believe he was in Switzerland. Even today, there are millions of American families who cannot afford a nutritious diet." The dispute presaged subsequent divisions between "lunch-pail" and "lifestyle" American liberals.

With the 1960 election of President Kennedy, Galbraith emerged as a presidential confidant. He argued vigorously against U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War. As Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara later recalled, "Ken Galbraith was particularly lethal because he presented his views with the wit Kennedy relished."

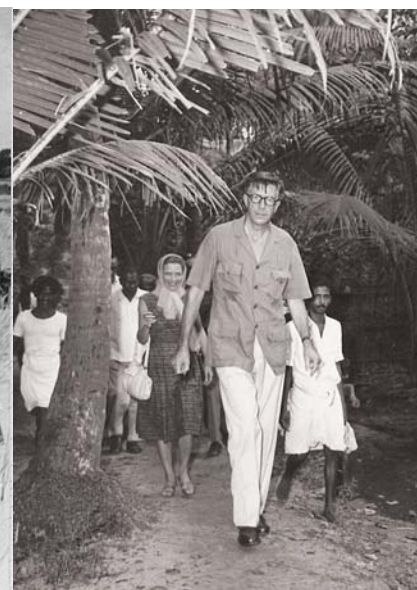
After his ambassadorship in India, Galbraith returned to Washington as an adviser to Kennedy's successor, but broke with President Lyndon B. Johnson over the Vietnam War.

During the remainder of his long academic career, Galbraith produced more than 30 books and numerous articles and continued to advocate progressive economic and social policies.

Galbraith's later career saw the bestowal of numerous awards. In 1999, the Modern Library included *The Affluent Society* among the century's 100 finest English language works of non-fiction. In 2000, President Bill Clinton awarded Galbraith the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States' highest civilian honor. □

About the Author: Michael Jay Friedman is a writer for *The Washington File*, produced by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State.

Top: Ambassador Galbraith was a frequent visitor to Prime Minister Nehru's home, Teen Murti Bhavan in New Delhi. From far left: Galbraith and his wife, Catherine, danced with construction workers at a party to celebrate the completion of the new Ambassador's residence, Roosevelt House, in October 1962; the Ambassador served lunch to children at Madras School in New Delhi. As an agricultural economist, Galbraith enjoyed trips to the countryside. He visited a rice transplantation field in Orissa and a coconut farm in Kerala.



IN MEMORIAM